News Release

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Trading archives chart how Britain's taste for tea grew

Historians and computer experts have joined forces to shed light on one of the 19th century's great social transformations … how Britain gave up coffee to become a nation of tea drinkers.

Researchers have used bespoke software to trawl historic trade documents that provide insights into the changing habit, which was accelerated by a failure of the Ceylon coffee crop.

Experts used a software technique called text mining to pore over details of commodity movements between Britain and Ceylon, which became modern-day Sri Lanka.

Their discovery offers fresh perspectives into the development, which stepped up after the outbreak of a fungus called coffee rust in Ceylon in the 1860s.

Ceylon's plantations switched their focus to tea growing and coffee production moved east to Indonesia – which is why coffee is sometimes known as java. Tea continued its rise as the hot drink of choice in British homes.

Although it was already known that the coffee rust outbreak impacted on British tastes, this new project enables researchers to build a clearer picture of how the process evolved.

The project is part of a wider initiative called Trading Consequences, which charts the commercial growth of the British Empire. It details the economic and environmental impact of shipping valuable commodities such as building materials, tea, fruit and spices.

Researchers used text mining – which is faster than manual reading – to survey thousands of digitised documents. Sources included British and Canadian Government documents, newspapers from around the world, books and journals.

Edinburgh researchers processed 11 million pages of text, resulting in a 150 gigabyte database. Project users can access interactive graphics, generated from data, which help to make the findings more accessible

The project has been led by the University of Edinburgh in collaboration with the Universities of St Andrews and Saskatchewan and York University, Canada. The EDINA national data centre at University of Edinburgh has stored information garnered in the study.

The two-year project forms part of Digging into Data, a wider initiative by Jisc, the UK's digital information body.

Ranked among the top universities in the world

Dr Beatrice Alex, of the University of Edinburgh, said: "It is essential that the mined data is accessible and usable. Our text mining work is combined with engaging visualisations, which really bring the data from the historical document collections to life."

Professor Aaron Quigley, of the University of St Andrews, said: "The ability to explore the text mined data in various visualisations allows scholars to think about their research and inquiries in new ways. As a result we can expect new and unexpected insights opening new avenues of historical inquiry."

Dr Jim Clifford, of the University of Saskatchewan, said: "We have created a giant new database that allows us to explore the process of globalisation – already well underway during the nineteenth century – from a different perspective than that of previous studies."

The work is supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council and the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

To find out more, please go to: http://tradingconsequences.blogs.edina.ac.uk/

For further information, please contact:

Andrew Moffat, Press and PR Office
Tel +44 131 650 9836 or +44 (0)7979 446 209. Email andrew.moffat@ed.ac.uk

Ronald Kerr, Press and PR Office
Tel +44 131 650 9547 or +44 (0)7979 446 209. Email Ronald.Kerr@ed.ac.uk

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